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'Carnival 50: More than Glitter and Feathers'

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Carnival as a Celebration of Fertility and Community

Carnival is a socially complex festival. Thus, the interpretations I present today are only some of many possible interpretations of the meaning of carnival in Aruba.

I begin with some general comments on the nature and origins of carnival in the old world in order to reveal the antiquity of several features of our modern Caribbean carnival. I will then discuss some of the features of the Aruba carnival that I found of particular interest; these are the role of the queen as she relates to fertility and community, and the carnival parades as a model of Aruban society.

The celebration we variously call Carnival or Bacchanal or Mas, is a public celebration with ancient roots. Anthropologists and other social scientists study it with interest. As people are preparing to participate in the many carnival events, many are thinking about how they are going to represent themselves to themselves and to others - not only as individuals, but also as members of distinct social and ethnic groups.

The carnival season is an opportunity to engage players in conversations, to observe individual and group behavior, and to listen carefully to what they are saying about the meaning of carnival for them. It is also important to talk to the spectators, the organizers, and to other interested actors like businesses and government. All these groups have different vested interests in the festival. And depending on whom you are speaking with, one can elicit different views on the meaning of the celebrations.

Old World Origins:

The origins of carnival are related to many old world Celtic, Germanic and Slavic agricultural festivals that were celebrated at the end of the seasonal cycle between winter (solstice) and spring (Vernal equinox). These involved ritual preparations for sowing and planting crops in the spring. The celebrations were dedicated to the gods associated with the rebirth of nature's forces in the New Year. Because the central meaning of the rituals was the fertility of crops, animals and humans, a good deal of sexual licentiousness was always central to the festivities.

Many elements of the modern carnival can be traced back also to the later Greco-Roman sun, wind, and water worship festivals of Saturnalia, Bacchanalia, and Lupercalia. The best known of these is the Saturnalia, which celebrated Saturn the god of agriculture. This festival was accompanied by a period of license when the customary restraints of law and morality were thrown aside. For example, Roman slaves were set free during the weeklong festival period, and a mock king was elected from among them to rule over the festivities. During this time, the slaves were given the right to exchange roles with their masters, and to criticize and ridicule them. An effigy of the mock king was burned at the end of the festivities to symbolize the end of his rule.

These features -- mock kings, exchange of dress, roles and statuses are still a part of carnival ritual today. In Aruba, the mock king is Rey Momo who reigns over the carnival festivities until he is burned at the pole on the eve of Ash Wednesday.

Another important Roman agricultural celebration was the Bacchanalia. This was a series of wild orgiastic festivals celebrated between winter and spring. Bacchus was the god of wine, pleasure and sensuality. He was crowned with vine leaves, and pulled through the streets in a ship filled with wine. He was followed by a wild parade of revelers and musicians, some masquerading as satyrs and centaurs comporting themselves with lechery and drunkenness.

Today, we still see a good deal of drinking in carnival, and in Greco-Roman times it was believed to 'liberate the senses'. We also still see the floats pulled through the streets, and parades of revelers in costumes, accompanied by musical bands.

The Romans also celebrated Lupercalia in which the bad luck of the old year was purged to ensure the fertility of the new season. Cakes and food were offered, and animals were sacrificed to represent the death of the old year. Young men covered themselves with the animal skins and ran races to catch the spring.

These Greco-Roman celebrations were introduced into Europe where they blended with existing rituals similarly marking the death and rebirth of nature. By the middle ages, these European festivities were also celebrating temporary escape from the strict teachings of the Catholic Church. This began as the Catholic Lenten period became caught up with the agricultural rituals practiced between winter and spring. During these festivities, the people celebrated before the pious and self-sacrificing season of Lent with a feverish sense of excess and sensuality. Revelers mocked the religious establishment with comic buffoonery and grotesque masquerades. Noisy mobs paraded through the streets by torchlight; they fought pitched battles throwing ashes, corn, rotten fruit and eggs, and flour.

We still see flour or confetti thrown in many carnivals today; in Mardi Gras it is bead necklaces and coins. In the Aruba children's carnival, it is candy. In Aruba we see the comic mocking masquerades of carnival groups like Hoffi Prikichi. And we still see the torchlight parades in the form of the Tivoli's fakkeloptocht.

New World Origins:

When Europeans came to the New World, they brought their pre-Lenten carnivals. Here they blended with Latin American and West African celebrations. Slaves from West Africa brought their masquerades. These were replete with magic and mysticism where

references to ancestral spirits were common in music and dance. Masqueraders called 'Moco jumbies' walked on stilts, and whips were cracked to deflect evil supernatural forces. Costumes were adorned with paper, cloth strips, sequins, raffia, animal horns, and shells. Masqueraders stitched mirrors into their costumes to deflect attacks by witches, angry ancestors and other malevolent forces. Later, the slaves incorporated feathers into their costumes to pay homage to their similarly enslaved Arawak and Carib brothers. These ritual and decorative elements from Africa fused with the European elements to form a Caribbean carnival celebration with its own unique aesthetic.

Today, the modern carnival is largely a secular urban festival enjoyed by all groups and classes. Because of its customary permissiveness, the celebration provides an opportunity for people to behave in ways that society would not normally condone. But carnival has always provided a time a place to become a little crazy, to over eat, and over drink, and to generally misbehave. Cross-dressing, undressing, open displays of lovemaking, the flaunting of gay culture, over-eating, and heavy drinking and fighting are all common pursuits in carnivals. Under the spell of Bacchus, god of gaiety and wine (or beer, rum, and whiskey) lewd behavior, fighting, and general rowdiness tend to surface. Why should we be surprised since this has been the function of the carnival for centuries? So revelers 'party hard' – and if necessary, challenge the structures of control that try to contain them.

Carnival also provides a time and place for a community to comment upon itself; participants are not only talking to each other about who they are to themselves, but also talking to outsiders about who they are to outsiders. In Aruba, through parade themes, queen competitions, musical events, costumes and comedy, we are offered insights into the nature of the Aruban community.

Carnival Queen as Symbol of Fertile Community:

Native female identity is treated to some elaboration during the Aruban carnival season through the central figure of the carnival queen. The role of the queen in Aruba differs

from some other carnivals in which the queen is seen as a symbol of sexuality and fertility. This attitude is not surprising since carnival is as much about the coming of spring with its association of lovemaking, as it is with the excess and self indulgence of the pre-Lenten season. We know that in the medieval carnivals of the Old World, the festivities were viewed and practiced as sexual - this is the origin for all the preening and flirting, and provocative dancing we see in Aruba today -- especially among teenagers. However, this sexuality, when associated with the figure of the carnival queen poses a problem for conservative - predominantly catholic Aruba.

Here, women are cherished as wives and mothers, and valued for their role in enculturating their children with customary native values, beliefs, and behaviors. In some places, as carnival queens, women become 'edible' -- sexual objects to be desired and consumed. They are seen as the embodiment of tropical heat and sexuality - for some the ideal female.

But in Aruba, this interpretation does not correspond to the presentation of the ideal native woman. Neither is it a correct interpretation of Aruba's carnival queen. Perhaps for these reasons, the presentation of the queen is carefully controlled. As the Queen of carnival, she embodies the joyfulness of the festival -- she must be shimmering, happy, and embody the spirit of the festivities.

Judges, which have included invited tourists, are instructed not to judge body or facial beauty or 'sexiness', but rather 'vivacity', 'joyous personality', and the ability to 'dance'. As one queen told me: "your arms must be open, you have to be feminine. You have to keep your hands up - they express whom you are. Never stop dancing, always stay moving, it's very important. And never, never, stop smiling".

As a representative native female, Aruba's carnival queen is also a symbol of the Aruban people with their conservative values. The carnival committee ensures, therefore, that these idealistic codes are not broken by any improper or indecent behavior that would undermine this public presentation of native culture. Hence, contestants are censored if

they wear costumes that are too revealing. Their deportment on stage is prescribed and performed within certain limits of propriety. Overt sexuality must be contained because this causes men to misbehave or fight, disturbing the competitions. This is seen as offensive and anti-social behavior.

The final, and perhaps, most important reason to control the reading of the carnival queen is because she reflects the process of successful community shaping.

Arubans have long been district and kin group oriented and until the turn of the 20th century, there was little contact between the various barrios. This pattern has changed, but during the carnival season, people tend to withdraw into their social clubs and centro di barrios - not only to prepare for the festivities, but also to show kinship and district allegiance. And as all Arubans know, competition between barrios and clubs can become 'hot', and on rare occasions, lead to physical encounters.

In her role as district queen, a female represents her barrio. In the time of preparation, metaphorically speaking, she becomes the 'queen bee' as the community rallies around to nourish, preen, train, and beautify her. This relationship is fully emphasized at the final Island-wide elections where she is awarded point for 'community support'. A winning candidate therefore, implicitly symbolizes a supportive and successful (fertile) community.

Support is manifested in other ways, for example, by the party aesthetic of her attendants on the floor of the arena. They are colorful (they wear tee shirts with their candidates portrait, and carry huge bunches of balloons in the candidates chosen color theme). They are 'joyous' (they dance, laugh, chant, and cheer). They are 'noisy' (supporters bring brass bands, whistles, and air horns) - the louder the better. The idea of community support is clearly central to these elections at every level of competition and the gatherings display a good deal of sociability and mutual support.

Aruba as a Fertile Community:

If we move from the community to the national level, and look at the Arubans through the lens of the grand parade, we see a multicultural nation of peoples from many places, of many ethnic origins, and who have brought with them, different languages and cultures, and an astonishing array of traditions and customs. We see a modern middle class society that aspires to increased prosperity. We see also a friendly, moral, and hospitable people with a value for education, an easy sense of humor, and a love of children and family. This view, this reading, of Aruban society can be derived by participating in different parades, by noting the choice of group themes, costumes, and road pieces, and through observing the way these are structured and managed (nurtured) through close community and group cooperation. In this sense, one might also regard the public spectacle of a diverse community playing carnival together as a symbol of a successful multicultural society. In fact, the carnival is an important integrative mechanism for national unity as the Aruban people celebrate the springtime of another year.